

Discourse I

One who had traveled the world and lost his friends, a man bewildered of heart and disturbed of mind,

Had the tale from a man who knew thereof that once a certain caliph had six sons.

All were by nature of lofty ambition and had not dismissed feelings of pride from their minds.

Of all the sciences of their time they were each without peer in every one.

Since they were each of them masters of the arts of this world, since each of them was an Adam in both worlds,

Their father made them sit together one day. 'You are all', he said, 'conversant with the knowledge of the world.

You are a caliph's sons, you are kings—what does each of you ask of the world?

If you have a hundred wishes or if but one, tell me, each of you.

When I know how each of you thinks I will order the affairs of each in accordance with his desire.'

One of the princes was the first to reveal his secret. 'It is related', he said, 'by the great and eminent

That the king of the peris has a virgin daughter to whom the moon cannot be compared.

She is as beautiful as the mind and as delicate as the soul. She is the fairest in earth or heaven.

If I can entirely realize this wish, it is all I crave until Judgment Day.

Being with such a beauty how should anyone seek any perfection beyond this?

He that is near to the sun, how should he wish for a single beam?

Such is my desire, and if I have it not, nothing but madness shall be my faith.'

Father's reply

The father said: 'Beware of lust, for with lust thou art very drunk.

When a man's heart is imprisoned in venery, all the coin of his being will be spent.

But every woman who is manlike in her conduct is a complete stranger to such lust,

Just as that woman who was separated from her husband became the leader of men in the court of God.'

(1) Story of the virtuous woman whose husband had gone on a journey¹

'There was a fair and beautiful woman, night and day were the patterns of her cheeks and locks.

She had much kindness and goodness and joined therewith virtue and continence.

In goodness she was a sign to the whole world; she had charm and she also had sweetness.

In every hair on her head that idol had more than fifty or even sixty curls.

Her eyes and eyebrows were *sad* and *nun*:² proof thereof was a decisive text, it was not like *nun*.³

When she opened her shining cornelians,⁴ she would slay the mighty with the water of Khidr.⁵

Thou mightest say that her smiling lips were a shell whereof the pearls were her teeth.

Gem-like beneath the smiling rubies of her lips the pearls of her teeth displayed their brightness.

Her chin was like a silver apple: from her apple mankind suffered affliction.

The heavens from the picture of her face were such that their soul reeled in the manner other lovers.

Those who scattered pearls for words called her by the name of Marjuma.⁶

She was a woman such that the revolution of the turning wheel accounted her amongst the number of lion-like man.

It so happened that the husband of that woman suddenly set out upon the Pilgrimage.

That man had a younger brother but he was an ungenerous man.

He charged him to take care of his property on behalf of his family.

When he had spoken these words he finally set out upon the Pilgrimage; his brother accepted what he had commanded.

He applied himself to his brother's command and took great care of his wife.

Night and day he continued to work for her; every hour he would send her something more.

One day he cast a glance at that woman: he saw through the veil the face of that enchanting one.

His heart was lost and his head turned—nay, how shall I say what happened to him?

So had he fallen into the snare of that beauty that in one moment a hundred lives were spent.

He struggled with his reason, but every moment his love became more ardent.

Since he could not have his way with the woman, for a while he could do nothing with himself.

When love prevailed and sense quickly departed he quickly revealed his feelings to the woman.

He summoned her to him with force and gold and lamentation; she drove him from her with contumely.

She said to him: "Art thou not ashamed before God? Dost thou thus show respect to thy brother?

Is this thy religion and thy probity? Dost thou thus keep trust for thy brother?

Go, repent, return to God, and eschew this wicked thought."

That man said to the woman: "It is no use; thou must satisfy me at once,

Otherwise I will cease to concern myself about thee, I will expose thee to shame, I will slight thee.

Straightaway now I shall cast thee to destruction, I shall cast thee into a fearful plight."

The woman said to him: "I do not fear destruction. The destruction of this world is better for me than such destruction."

Now that wicked man feared lest the woman would tell his brother what had happened.

That vile person went off and in order to protect himself straightaway bought with gold four persons,

So that those vile wretches gave testimony that this woman had been guilty of adultery.

When her case had been heard by the cadî he at once sentenced her to be stoned.

They took her into the open country on to the high road and they cast stones upon her from all sides.

When stones without number had been cast upon that woman, they thought that her soul had departed from her.

As a warning to mankind they left her there just as she was.

The luckless woman was left upon the plain, left in the midst of the blood-soaked dust.

When the night had passed and day broken, the woman at last came a little to herself again.

She moaned in lamentation and weakness; from her narcissus she covered her Judas-tree with tulips.⁷

At dawn a Bedouin mounted on a camel was coming that way from some direction.

He heard that lamentation and became beside himself; he dismounted from his camel and went towards the woman.

"O woman", he asked, "who art thou who wast living like one dead?"

The woman said to him: "I am sick and distressed." The Bedouin said:

"I will tend thee."

He set her upon the camel and bore her hastily off; he carried her to his own abode.

He tended her assiduously day and night until that charmer was restored to health.

Again her charm began to return and to affect her companions.

Again the pomegranate flower of her face became fresh, from her head there fell in rings the girdle of her hair.

From beneath the stones of her stoning she came into plain view like a ruby out of hard rock.

Seeing her beauty the Bedouin passed sentence on his own life.

From love other face he became beside himself, because of the pain he suffered the shirt on his body became a winding sheet.

He said to the woman: "Become my lawful spouse, for I have died; restore me to life by union with me."

The woman said to him: "Since I have a husband, now can I look for another?"

When his love had passed all bounds, in the end he called that woman to him in private.

The woman said to him: "O one whose head is turned away from the Faith, art thou not afraid of God's anger?"

For the Almighty's sake thou didst tend me—hast thou now obeyed the command of a vile demon?

When thou hast done a good deed do not spoil it; do not make a breach in the Ka'ba of good faith.

For when I did not agree to this thing, I suffered many an affliction and was stoned.

Now thou too dost call me to this thing—knowest thou not how pure of faith I am?

If thou rend my person into a thousand pieces, there shall be no blemish on my pure body.

Begone, for the sake of thy lust do not purchase with thy soul eternal torment."

Because of the honesty of that pure woman, the Bedouin took her as his sister.

He repented of entertaining that thought, for that practice was the work of the devil.

The Bedouin had a black slave: that black suddenly came in from a journey.

When he saw that woman's face he gave her his heart; his heart and soul burnt up and he yielded up his body.

In his heart there arose the desire for union with that woman, but that desire could not be accomplished.

He said to the woman: "I am the night, thou art like the moon—why wilt thou not be together with me?"

The woman said to him: "That shalt thou never accomplish, for thy master asked this of me many times.

Since he, the moon-faced one, did not then obtain union with me, how shalt thou afterwards, O black-faced one?"

The slave said to her: "Dost thou turn me away? Thou shalt not escape from me until thou deliverest me.

Otherwise I shall boldly devise some trick so that thou shall depart from this tent a wanderer."

The woman said to him: "Do what thou wilt. Why should I fear, for I care not even if my fate is destruction."

The slave became exceedingly angry with her; after being thus to her from love, he became thus.

One night he rose up because of the spite that he bore. His master's wife had a handsome child.

He killed that child in its cradle and then took that bloodstained knife

And hid it under that woman's pillow as though to say, "The cruel woman shed the blood."

At dawn the mother of that poor murdered child awoke in order to suckle it.

She beheld that child with severed head; she raised a cry from her pain-filled heart.

She filled the world with her clamor and lamentation, she cut off her plaits and bound them around her waist.

They sought to find who had done that thing, who had rendered lifeless so helpless a creature.

From under the woman's pillow there emerged into view a bloodstained dagger.

They all said: "The woman did this deed; this worthless one slew him so vilely."

The slave and the mother of the child beat that young woman more than can be said.

The Bedouin came and said: "O woman, what harm did I do thee

That thou shouldst slay an infant like unto a moon and shouldst not fear the blood of an innocent?"

The woman said: "Who has recorded [the like of] this in the world? God, O my brother, gave thee reason

That thou mightest apply thy reason and understanding, that thou mightest have thy share of reason.

Look with the eye of reason, O chaste one. Thou hast done me so much good.

For God's sake thou hast taken me as thy sister and many kindnesses thou hast shown me.

Is this the way that I would repay thee? Consider. What honour would come to me from this killing?"

The Bedouin, because he was wise in the ways of the world, was convinced by the woman's words.

He was certain that that woman was innocent but also that it was impossible for her to remain.

He said to the woman: "Since such a thing has fallen out, to see thee is from now on an abomination to the heart.

My wife, since she cast the suspicion of this upon thee, because of thee thinks of her child every moment.

Every hour her grief will be renewed, her affliction will become immeasurable.

She will speak ill to thee and not treat thee well, and if I treat thee well she will not.

Thou must depart from here of thy own accord." And in secret he straightway gave her three hundred dirhems,

Saying "Spend this upon thyself on the journey." The woman took the dirhems and went her way.

When that grief-stricken one had gone a little way along the road, there suddenly appeared a village in the distance.

She saw a gallows set up beside the road with people gathered around it from every direction.

They were about to hang from the gallows that day a young man sore of heart and heavily afflicted.

That woman asked a man: "Who is this? Tell me what his crime is?"

They said to her: "This village is the property of an emir who in the practice of injustice is without a peer.

In this village, O discriminating one, it is the custom that whoever cannot pay the poll-tax.

Is hanged upside down by this tyrant—now he will drag him to the gallows."

The woman said to him: "How much is the tax which he needs at this moment?"

They told her: "It is well known. Every year his tax is exactly three hundred dirhems."

The woman said to herself, like the kind person she was: "Redeem him now with thy life.

As thou didst escape with thy life from stones and gallows, with thy life redeem him from the gallows."

She said the them: "If I give this money will he be sold to me?"

They said: "At once."

She quickly gave them those three hundred dirhems so that that young man was quickly relieved of grief.

When she had given the dirhems the woman set off at once; the young man sped after like an arrow.

When he saw the woman's face from afar, his soul came up to his lips and his laments arose to heaven.

He became giddy and cried out: "Why did she free me from the gallows?

Because if I had lost my life suddenly on the gallows I should never have suffered anything like my love for this moon-faced one."

He spoke much with the woman, but how should that profit him? For the woman was not fire, how should she have that smoke?

He walked much with the woman and pleaded with her; he brought her nothing therefrom but shame.

The woman said to him: "Is this how thou dost treat me? Thus I did and such is my reward?"

The young man said to her: "Thou hast stolen my heart and soul. How shall I turn away me head from thee for a single moment?"

The woman said to him: "If thou dost not turn away thy head from me, thou shalt not have even the slightest union with me."

They walked a long way, talking and listening, until they both came to the sea.

On the shore was a heavily laden ship, all full of merchandise and merchants.

Since that young man despaired of [winning] the woman, he called one of the merchants to him,

Saying, "I have a slave-girl like a moon. She has no fault save haughtiness.

I have seen none as disobedient as she—how long shall I put up with her giddiness?

Although there is none like her in appearance, I will not endure her evil disposition.

I have striven much. How long must I strive? Now, if thou wishest I will sell her to thee."

The woman said to that merchant: "Beware, never purchase me from him.

For I am a married woman and free and it was I who saved him from injustice."

The merchant did not listen to her words; he bought her from him for a hundred dinars.

With a hundred acts of harshness they put her aboard the ship and they launched it from thence straightway.

When the purchaser saw the shape and mien beneath the veil he sold his soul for her.

His heart was storm-tossed in that sea; the crocodile of his lust gathered strength.

He approached the woman. She fell down, saying, "Come to my aid, O people, come to my aid

You are Muslims and I am a Muslim; you believe and I believe.

I am free and a married woman—God is my true witness at this moment.

You too have mothers and sisters, you too have daughters behind the curtain.

If anyone meditated this evil against them you would no doubt be distraught.

Since you would not approve that they should be so treated, why should you now approve that I should be so treated?

I am a stranger, a woman, poor and in distress, I am weak and feeble, vile and abject.

Do not offend the Consumer of Souls any more, for there is a tomorrow after today."

Since that woman was eloquent and sincere, the crew of the ship had compassion on her.

All at once the crew of the ship became her friends, they became the protectors of that sorrowful woman.

But whoever beheld her face sold a hundred hearts for the love thereof.

In a word the crew of the ship became in the end madly enamored other.

For a long time they spoke to one another of their love for her, for a long time they concealed that love from her.

Since every heart was filled with longing for her they all came to an agreement

That they should suddenly seize that woman and satisfy their desires by force.

When the woman learned of these wicked men's feelings, she saw the whole sea as a liver from her heart's blood.

She opened her mouth [and said]: "O Knower of Secrets, preserve me from the evil of these wicked men.

In both worlds I have no one but Thee. Remove this desire from the hearts of these men.

If Thou wilt grant me death. Thou canst, for death is better than such life.

Give me liberation or death today, for I cannot endure in this agony.

How long wilt thou cause me to walk in blood? Thou wilt find none more wretched than I."

When she had spoken these words and lost consciousness, because of that woman the water of the sea began to swell.

A fire arose from that burning water so that the sea shone like hell.

In one moment the people of that ship were all together hurled headlong into the fire.

They were all at once turned to ashes, but the goods of all of them remained behind.

A wind came in from the side and brought the ship to a town.

The woman cast those ashes overboard and made herself men's clothes.

So that in order to escape from the clutches of lovemaking she might hold up her head like a man.

Many people came along the road from the town: they saw a young man [handsome] as the moon,

Seated alone in that ship, and with a whole world of goods tightly bundled.

They questioned that sun-cheeked one, asking, "Hast thou come alone with all these goods?"

She said to them: "Until I come before the king I shall tell my tale to no one."

They told the king about her, saying, "Today a young man has arrived, who is handsome indeed,

Alone, having brought a vessel loaded with goods: he will tell nothing more.

He asks for thee that he may speak and tell the tale of the vessel and those goods."

The king marveled and set out; he came to that moon of the age.

The wise king questioned her and she spoke as follows: "There were many of us.

We embarked on a ship and voyaged a long way, all the time day and night.

When the idle ones on that ship saw me, they chose in their lust to love me.

I prayed to God and He so wrought that He averted the evil of that handful of wicked men.

A fire came down and consumed them all; He saved me and illuminated my soul.

See, but one remains left; it is not a man but [only] black charcoal.

From this I received a warning: I have no wish for the goods of this world.

Take them all, they are wares without number; but I crave one boon of thee,

That on the shore of this sea thou shalt build for me a fair shrine in which I may worship,

And shalt say that no person, clean or unclean, shall have aught to do with me.

For since it has chanced that I have come to rest here, I will worship God day and night."

When the king and the army heard her words and beheld her miraculous powers,

So much did they believe in her straightway that they swerved not a hair's breadth from her command.

They erected for her such a shrine that thou wouldst say it was the Ka'ba itself.

She entered it and engaged in devotion: she lived for a long time in contentment.

When that king fell into the snare of death, he summoned his ministers and army.

He said to them: "It seems to me fitting, since I am departing from this world,

That this hermit youth should be your commander and king in my place.

In order that the people may be at ease because of him, execute this will, O men."

He spoke thus, and his pure soul ascended to heaven, and this earth swallowed him up beneath its dust.

Straightway the ministers gathered together and assembled the emirs and people,

They went before that woman and told her the secret: they declared to her the king's will and testament.

They said to her: "Any command that thou wouldst make is in thy power, for this kingdom is thine.

The woman of course had no desire for this office, for how shall a hermit become a ruler?

They said to her: "O holy one, choose sovereignty. Why make excuses?"

The woman said to them: "Since there is no escape therefrom, I must have a wife like unto a piece of the moon.

I should have a maid as my lawful spouse for I am grown weary of solitude."

The nobles said: "O king, ask for the daughter of any of us thou wilt."

She said to them: "Send a hundred maidens, but send them all with their mothers,

So that I too may see each one of them and choose her whom I wish from all of them."

The nobles with all their heart sent that same day a hundred beautiful maidens.

They all went forward with their mothers; beside themselves with bashfulness they went.

That woman revealed herself to them saying, "How is kingship fitting to a woman?

Tell these words to your husbands and relieve me of this heavy burden."

The women departed dumbfounded and informed the nobles thereof.

All those who heard it, great and small, marveled at the case of the woman.

They sent back a woman to her to say: "Since thou art the proud heir apparent,

Set someone over us as king or else rule thyself like a man."

She chose someone acceptable from amongst them all and then concerned herself with her own affairs.

With her own hand she set up a king, she did not budge for a kingdom.

As for thee, my son, for a piece of bread thou wouldst turn the whole world upside down.

A woman did not budge for a kingdom—show me a single man like that.

The whole world heard the fame of that woman, how in such-and-such a place there was such-and-such a person,

Whose prayers were answered like no one else's, a woman who had no equal amongst men.

Many a paralytic became from her breath such that he walked and moved about.

Many a report was spread about her through the world, no one knew her [true] measure.

When that woman's husband returned from the Pilgrimage he nowhere saw her face.

Suddenly he beheld a desolate household, his brother blind and bewildered.

Neither his hands nor his feet could move, for he had become paralyzed and fixed to one place.

Night and day he was stricken with grief for that woman, the torment of hell had gripped his skirt.

Now his soul burned on account of his brother, now it burned on account of his ceaseless pain.

His brother questioned him about his wife, he began to relate his story to his brother:

"That woman had committed adultery with a soldier and a number of people (strange to tell!) had testified against her.

When the cadi heard these words from those people, it pleased him to sentence her to be stoned.

Then he caused her to be cruelly stoned. Do thou remain, for she has departed."

When that deserted man heard these words he was exceedingly grieved at her death and depravity.

Having wept and beaten himself he went into a corner and mourned and held his peace.

When he saw his brother in so sore a case, none of his limbs functioning except his tongue,

He said to him: "O handless and footless one, I have heard that at this present time in such-and-such a place,

There is a woman as famous as the sun, whose prayers are answered by God.

Many a blind person has become seeing through her prayers, many a helpless paralytic has begun to walk.

If thou wilt I will take thee thither—perhaps that woman will restore thee to health."

That man's heart was glad. He said: "Hurry. I am lost. If thou wilt, help me."

Now that good man had a donkey; he bound him upon that donkey and took to the road.

By chance they came one day upon that road, upon that Bedouin at nighttime.

Since that Bedouin was a chivalrous man, he made them both his guests that night.

The Bedouin entered into conversation with them [asking]: "Whither are you going from here?"

The woman's husband said to him: "I have heard a tale that a woman hermit utters prayers

Such that many blind persons and afflicted ones have recovered on account of her charms and prayers.

This brother of mine too has fallen ill; he is afflicted with paralysis and blindness.

I am taking him to that woman, so that perhaps he may walk again and become possessed of sight."

Then the Bedouin said to him: "Some time ago a very wise woman chanced to come here.

My slave used her violently and because of that wickedness he became paralyzed and blind.

Now I shall bring him with you also—perhaps he too will be cured by that woman's prayer."

In the end they set out and traveled many a stage. In that village they reached that stage

Where they had been about to hang that young man on the gallows; there was a room which they took.

The room was worthy of that caravan, for it belonged to that tyrannous young man.

The young man, strange to relate, was paralyzed; neither sight was left nor [the use of] his hands and feet.

They said to one another: "This is our case also, for we have the same goods, and this is our grief.

Since we have acquired his coin, it is fitting that we should have alighted here."

The young man's mother was there also; when she saw two handless and footless ones,

She enquired about their pain and affliction, and they straightway told her the true story.

That woman wept a great deal and said: "I too have a son, one like these two persons.

I will come with you." She sprang up and bound her son tightly upon a mount.

All three set out together and came to that woman at dawn-time.

At dawn the morning of happiness breathed; the hermit woman came out from her place of retirement.

She beheld her husband from afar and from joy prostrated herself in worship.

The woman wept much; she said, "How in my confusion can I go out?

What shall I do or what shall I say to my husband, for I cannot show my face?"

When she looked further back behind him she saw those three persons; she saw the three enemies of her life-blood.

She said to herself: "It is enough that my husband has brought witnesses with him as companions.

All three are great sinners and their hands and feet bear witness thereto.

When I see the eyes of all three, what more do I wish? What need I say? God is sufficient witness."

The woman came and cast many a glance at her husband, but she threw a veil over her face.

She said to her husband: "State what thou wishest." That godly man answered: "I have come here for a prayer, for I have with me a blind and sorely afflicted one."

The woman said to him: "This is a sinful man: if he confesses his crime, He will be freed from this unseemly pain; otherwise he will remain blind and afflicted."

The man who had been on the Pilgrimage asked his brother, saying:
"Since thou art exhausted and full of need,

Pronounce thy sin so that thou mayst be saved, otherwise thou shalt be the eternal partner of grief."

His brother said: "Pain and suffering for a hundred years would be better for me than to speak of this matter."

They talked for a long time until at last he was shamed into telling the whole tale from beginning to end.

"I am," he said, "a cripple on account of that crime. Now, if thou wilt, kill me, and if thou wilt, forgive me."

His brother, having reflected for a while, although it was difficult for him, Said to himself, "Since my wife has disappeared, I shall at any rate save my brother."

He forgave him in the end; the woman prayed and in a single moment freed him from a hundred pains.

He again could walk and grasp; his eyes could see again.

Then the slave's master asked him to declare his crime truthfully.

The slave said to him: "If thou preparest to kill me, I dare not repeat my crime."

Then the Bedouin said to him: "Speak truly, for today this fear of thine for me has departed.

I have forgiven thee eternally—why dost thou fear? Why dost thou offer excuses?"

In the end he divulged that secret, saying, "I killed thy child in its cradle.

That woman was not guilty of the killing; because of my wicked deed I have become afflicted."

When the woman saw that he was speaking the truth, she at once offered up a prayer: she made him both seeing and capable of supplying his wants.

The old woman likewise brought her son forward, and that man too declared his crime.

He said to her: "A woman came to my rescue when, all at once, she redeemed me from the gallows.

The woman redeemed me with her life, and then I sold her. My tale is short."

The woman prayed so that that young man also in a moment was able to see and move.

Then she sent them all out and told her husband to remain standing there.

In front of him she drew the veil from her face: her husband gave out a cry as soon as he was aware.

He lost consciousness; when he came to, the kind-hearted woman came before him.

She said to him: "What came upon thee suddenly that thou didst cry out and fall to the ground?"

He said to her: "I had a wife and for a moment I thought that thou wert she.

Thy limbs and hers are such that one cannot say there is a hair of difference between them.

One would say that thou art exactly like my wife in speech, mien, stature and gait.

Were she not dissolved in the dust, this grief-stricken one would say that thou art she."

That woman said to him: "Glad tidings, O man, for that woman did not sin or commit adultery.

I am that woman; I walked in the path of religion, I was not stoned and I did not die.

God rescued me from many a tribulation; by His grace He brought me to this corner.

And now a hundred thanks to God every moment. Who has granted us this reunion."

That man fell to the ground in worship, saying, "O pure God,

How shall my tongue offer thanks to Thee, seeing that this is beyond the limits of my heart and soul?"

He went out and called his companions and told them that tale and all that good and evil.

There rose a shout and a cry to heaven from every tongue.

The slave, the brother and that young man also, were filled with shame but with rejoicing also.

As that woman first of all put them to shame, she afterwards gave wealth to them and forgave them.

When she had made her husband king she gave the viziership to the Bedouin.

When she had laid that happy foundation, she busied herself in that same place with the worship of God.'